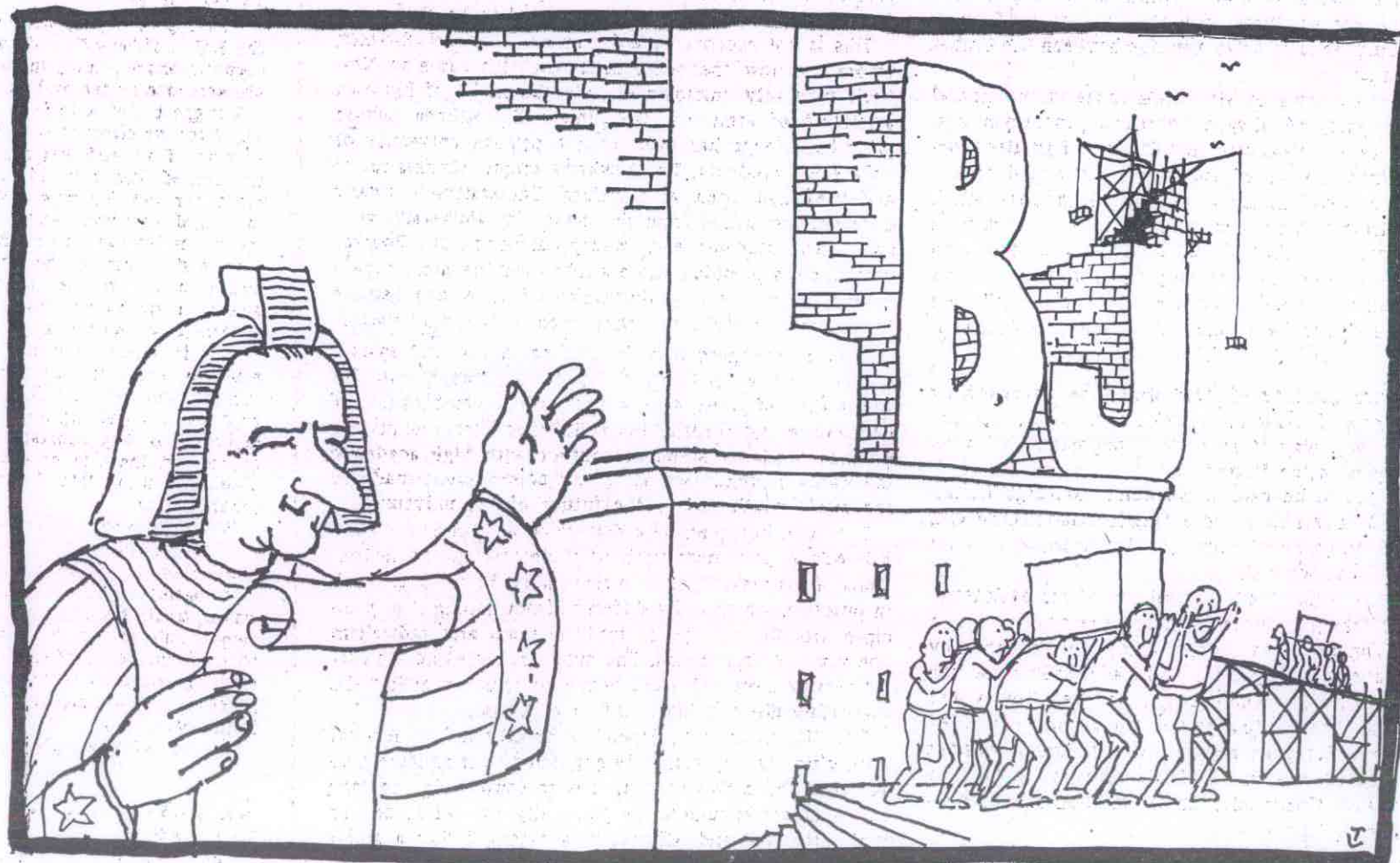


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A Monumental Undertaking

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By MOLLY IVINS

AUSTIN, Tex.—As you whip along Interstate Highway 35 in Austin these days, you encounter a huge, brand-new exit sign. A vast expanse of green that stretches across the freeway declares: "Lyndon B. Johnson Library—Next Right." It is larger than the sign announcing the exit for the state capitol.

The sign is only in proportion to the library itself. More than 2,000 tourists a day are now going through the nation's newest Presidential library, about which there is one overriding fact. It is big.

BIG, as in monumental, gargantuan, grandiose. What this library does is, it takes you and hits you over the head with Lyndon Baines Johnson—with his words, his face, his ideas, his travails and his accomplishments.

An LBJ Library press release describing the place explains, "A tour through the LBJ Library will be as close to a conversation with the former President of the United States as the planners can make it." If everything I have ever heard of the famous "Johnson treatment" is true, I want to congratulate those planners. It's staggering. The building is Lyndon Baines Johnson in travertine marble.

The first floor is a low-ceilinged affair lined with display cases. Then you are led around to the Staircase. The grand staircase at the Elysée Palace can now retire into honorable obscurity. This heavy, W.P.A. modern Staircase leads up, up to light and glory. Specifically, it leads up to a Great Hall, seven stories high.

At the top of the Staircase is a twelve-foot black granite slab bearing four quotations chosen by Mr. Johnson. Facing the Staircase is a multi-tiered wall of thousands and thousands of red buckram boxes, each bearing a gold Presidential seal and containing his papers.

Harry Middleton, director of the library, says the boxes had to be redesigned several times to get the right size (big enough for legal-sized papers) and then the labels came with round corners instead of square and the labels had to be sent back and the Presidential seals came out more green than gold and the seals had to be redone and finally they got gold-gold seals and were all set, but they came in one morning and the gold-gold seals were dropping off like leaves in autumn. So the whole library staff sat

around for a couple of days gluing the seals back on.

On either side of the Staircase, one finds five television screens showing continuous films on Johnson's Greatest Programs. And in case a large group comes in, its members won't have to stand around those itty-bitty TV screens in clumps; they can go into a plush theater and see the show.

The great favorite with tourists, reports Middleton, is the exact-detail, 7/8-scale replica of the Oval Room on the top floor. The Oval Room is closed to tourists when Mr. Johnson wants to use it as an office.

There is a display called "Controversies in the Johnson Years," allegedly designed to present criticism of the Johnson Administration.

A close study of that display leaves one with the impression that Johnson was beset by snotty intellectuals, attacked by racists while behaving like a second emancipator, and hounded by hawks demanding that he obliterate the Vietnamese entirely. The strongest antiwar letter on display, from conductor Leopold Stokowski, is a model of decorum.

This modest monument to the Johnson era cost the taxpayers of Texas \$15.8 million: It came from the University of Texas building fund. A Federal grant of \$2.6 million went into the neighboring LBJ School of Public Affairs, and the General Services Administration, under the provision of the 1956 Presidential Libraries Act, is kick-

ing in with the annual operating budget, \$544,000 this year, largest of all the Presidential library budgets.

Historians and other researchers will have 31 million papers in 43,000 red buckram boxes to play with. And that's really what it's all about, history. It's as though Lyndon Johnson were trying to pick up those five years in the White House with his bare hands and squeeze them into a shape that will make history stand back in awe. I do not think I would care to write a history of the Johnson years in that building, surrounded, overwhelmed by his words chiseled in granite and his deeds recorded in plastic display cases.

Molly Ivins is a reporter for The Texas Observer in Austin.